

AUDIO

FAQ

Q How can I listen to BBC radio using my PC or an internet radio?

A In Windows, simply direct your web browser to www.bbc.co.uk/radio and click on the link to Launch BBC Radio Player. You can select a station or an on-demand programme by name or the type of content. You can also watch the past week's BBC television programmes using the new iPlayer (www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer).

However, a web browser isn't as convenient as a standalone internet radio. Almost all can play the BBC's streaming radio. The key thing to look out for is support for WMA and RealAudio streams, as those are the formats currently favoured by the BBC. Recent trials tested a variety of new formats, but it seems unlikely that the BBC will ever use MP3 for live streaming.

Kat Orphanides

Printers and audio expert

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SANDISK Sansa View

★★★★★

£130 inc VAT
From www.play.com

Sandisk's MP3 players have always offered great value compared with Apple's iPods, and the new View is no exception. It looks similar to the e280 (see 'Also consider...' below) but is thinner (just 9mm) and feels tougher.

The View has improved on the e280's circular dial and separate buttons by merging them together, and the new controls are almost as easy to use as the iPod's Click Wheel. Above it is a 2.4in screen with a resolution of 240x320. It's a shame that Sandisk hasn't mounted it horizontally as Apple did with the new iPod Nano, as you have to turn the View on its side to watch videos. A slightly more serious issue is the narrow viewing angles, which force you to hold the player head on if you want to see the correct colours.

Disappointingly, most of our DivX files wouldn't play without first being converted in Sandisk's Video Converter, but MP4 and WMV files played fine. Video quality is great, thanks in part to the View's smooth frame rate of 30fps.

It's good to see 16GB of flash memory integrated, and even better to be able to add extra storage through the microSD card slot. An FM radio is built in, and you can record directly from it. There's a microphone, too, so you can use the View as a voice recorder.

Synchronising the View with Windows Media Player 11 or any



software that supports the Media Transfer Protocol (MTP) is easy. You may find dragging and dropping files on to the View frustrating, as you have to switch the power button to 'Hold' and press the left side of the direction pad while connecting the USB cable – there's no menu option to switch between MTP and MSC modes. The proprietary USB connector is also a pain as you must carry the cable with you if you need to charge the View or upload files to it. A standard mini USB port would have made life easier. Sound quality is great, and we have no complaints about the volume on offer. As you'd expect, the bundled earphones are nothing special, and you'll want to replace them with a higher-quality set. Unlike previous Sansas, the View doesn't come with a case, and this is another essential accessory if you want to avoid scratching the screen.

Battery life is good. When playing music, the View lasted 30 hours and three minutes. You can expect to watch four hours and 40 minutes of video before recharging.

The View isn't perfect, but it's still great value. The screen's viewing angles aren't a dealbreaker, and nor is the awkward drag-and-drop method. DivX support is the only serious omission and prevents the View receiving an award; otherwise, it's a fine choice.

Jim Martin

SUMMARY

- ✓ Decent capacity for the price
- ✓ Well built; easy to use
- ✗ Doesn't play DivX files

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 16GB capacity, microSD slot, supports MP3, WMA, Wav, unprotected AAC, MPEG4, H.264, WMV, audible audiobooks formats, 2.4in 240x320 LCD, USB Hi-Speed interface.
PART CODE SDMX10R016GKE70
DETAILS www.sandisk.com/sansa

PERFORMANCE (see page 62)



Also consider...

SANDISK Sansa e280

★★★★★

£70 inc VAT
From www.onlinememory.co.uk

BEST BUY This 8GB MP3 player is great value. It has an impressive battery life of 18 hours and 17 minutes. Its control wheel and menu system were easy to use and the 1.8in colour screen was free from graininess. Audio quality was consistently good. We were impressed by the speed and stability of its video-conversion software. It can be expanded via microSD cards.



MP3 PLAYER 8GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, JPEG and BMP images, MOV video (with limitations), USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE SDMX4-8192-A70
DETAILS www.sandisk.com
FULL REVIEW Nov 2007

SHURE SE210

★★★★★

£69 inc VAT
From www.digitaldirect.co.uk

BEST BUY Shure's SE210 sound-isolating earphones block out almost all external noise, thanks to foam sleeves that expand to fill the ear canal. This meant our music sounded clear and powerful even at low volumes. They produced a rich, precise sound and an excellent listening experience. Wearing the foam sleeves felt strange at first, and the cables and connectors are heavier than those of most earphones, but we soon became accustomed to these outstanding earphones.



EARPHONES 3.5mm stereo jack plug, 45cm cable, 10g, sensitivity 114dB, frequency response 22-19,000Hz, impedance 26 ohms
DETAILS www.shure.co.uk
FULL REVIEW Mar 2008

LOGITECH X-230

★★★★★

£27 inc VAT
From www.pixmania.co.uk

BEST BUY Logitech's X-230 speakers are among our all-time favourites, with a sound that's clearer, richer and more balanced than any other set under £50, and a few that cost more. The volume and bass controls are on the right satellite and subwoofer respectively, and all the cables except power protrude from the right satellite. If you want a set for music or games, there are no better speakers for this price.



STEREO SPEAKERS 2.1 configuration, 32W power, 3.5mm stereo cable inputs
PART CODE 970123-1120
DETAILS www.logitech.com
FULL REVIEW Jun 2007

SLEEK SA6

★★★★★

\$310 inc shipping (around £158 inc VAT)
From www.sleek-audio.com

Sleek's SA6 earphones are unique, as they come with interchangeable parts that enable you to tweak their sound to your taste. The kit includes three sets of treble tips, which are the plastic parts that protrude from the front of the units. Changing these alters the treble, so you can emphasise the high frequencies of pop and rock music, or create a smoother sound that's better suited to classical instruments.

Even more dramatic are the changes you get by switching the rear bass ports. These create either powerful or more restrained bass tones by allowing more or less air movement from the rear of the earphone body. This had a noticeable impact on the

sound without drowning out higher notes. The little interchangeable parts are incredibly small and easy to lose, but after experimenting with the tips you'll find a combination you like and stick with it.

We liked the beefy sound created by combining strong treble tones with a powerful bass, and the earphones' well-balanced audio output is up to producing this without overpowering the mid-tones.

Sleek provides a selection of rubber attachments to suit different ear sizes, but there is no choice of earplug styles as Shure includes with its earphones. We like that the earphone units have sockets into which the audio cable plugs. If it gets damaged, you can order a replacement for \$25 (around £12).

The SA6's sound quality was good, but doesn't quite match that of Shure's cheaper SE210 sound-isolating earphones (see 'Also consider...' opposite). Still, Sleek deserves praise for innovation, and we look forward to seeing new models in the future.

Kat Orphanides



SUMMARY

- ✓ Good sound quality
- ✓ Flexible, innovative design
- ✗ Fiddly; limited choice of sleeves

EARPHONES 3.5mm stereo jack plug, detachable 1.5m cable, 6g, sensitivity 110dB/A, impedance 50 ohms
DETAILS www.sleek-audio.com

M-AUDIO Axiom 25

★★★★★

£109 inc VAT
From www.DV247.com

M-Audio's Axiom 25 is a compact two-octave MIDI controller keyboard that's just small enough to carry around if you want to produce music on a laptop. Keyboards of this sort produce sound only when plugged into a MIDI device. The Axiom plugs into a USB port and can control the MIDI output from most sound cards. You can control other MIDI devices through the MIDI Out port on the back of the device.

The semi-weighted keys are sensitive to how hard you press them, and you can configure their

responsiveness to match your playing style. All the keys, knobs and pressure-sensitive trigger pads can have different MIDI functions assigned to them. Programming these is a fairly complex business, but the CD contains a detailed manual, and you can download M-Audio's Enigma program to make the process easier.

A copy of Ableton Live Lite 6.0.1 is bundled, but this doesn't work with the keyboard, so you'll have to update to version 6.0.10 to use it.

With everything running smoothly, the Axiom 25 was a pleasure to play, and is a powerful tool for anyone who wants to go beyond basic MIDI control. You face a steep learning curve if you want to make the most of the keyboard's features, and the accompanying software is of no use until you download the update.

Kat Orphanides



SUMMARY

- ✓ Weighted keys
- ✓ Range of programmable functions
- ✗ Complicated to use

MIDI CONTROLLER 25-key keyboard, eight programmable knobs, eight programmable pads, 3in mono LCD screen, MIDI out, MIDI in and USB Hi-Speed ports
PART CODE 9900-51411-10
DETAILS www.m-audio.com

APPLE iPod Nano

★★★★★

£129 inc VAT
From www.apple.com/uk

BEST BUY The latest version of Apple's iPod Nano combines great audio quality with a sharp 2in screen to create an outstanding multimedia player that's small enough to fit in the ticket pocket of a pair of jeans. It lasted over 30 hours in our audio battery test, and over five during video playback. Despite its mediocre headphones and its dependence on iTunes, the Nano exceeded our expectations with clear, rich sound at every setting and high-quality video rendition.



MP3 PLAYER 8GB capacity, supports MP3, Wav, AAC, Protected AAC, Audible, Apple Lossless and AIFF audio, JPEG images, H.264 and MPEG4 video (with limitations), USB Hi-Speed interface **PART CODE** MB257ZO/A
DETAILS www.apple.com/uk **FULL REVIEW** Dec 2007

IRHYTHMS A-211

★★★★★

£98 inc VAT
From www.scan.co.uk

BEST BUY 2007 has been a busy year for iPod-docking speakers. They are ideal for enjoying your MP3 collection without having to switch on your PC. The compact designs most manufacturers favour aren't ideal for providing good sound quality, and the fee Apple charges for its Made for iPod certification means that most iPod-compatible speakers are poor value compared with standard PC speakers.

IRhythms' A-211 set bucks this trend. The conventional subwoofer-based design provides much deeper bass and louder overall volumes than all-in-one designs, and it produces very high-quality sound, making it well suited for use with iPods and computers.



IPOD DOCK SPEAKERS 2.1 configuration, 133W RMS power, compatible with all docking iPods and first-generation Shuffle, auxiliary line input
PART CODE LN16326 **DETAILS** www.irhythms.com
FULL REVIEW Oct 2007

PHILIPS SHE2550 Extra Bass

★★★★★

£5 inc VAT
From www.argos.co.uk

BEST BUY Philips' SHE2550 Extra Bass earphones are among the cheapest products we've ever recommended, but this set of earbuds is far superior to the standard earphones that come with most MP3 players. They were comfortable to wear and their open speakers created a full, natural sound that's particularly well suited to rock, pop and dance music. As the name promises, they produce loud, solid bass tones, but this didn't detract from the clarity and precision of the sound.



EARPHONES 3.5mm stereo jack plug, 1.1m cable, 87g, sensitivity 106dB/A, frequency response 12-22,000Hz, impedance 16 ohms
PART CODE SHE2550/00 **DETAILS** www.philips.co.uk
FULL REVIEW Mar 2008